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Friday's Feature

By

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Different pruning methods needed for different plants

January can be a cold month along the Gulf Coast. We are, however, likely to have days or weeks of balmy weather. Don't be fooled by a few warm days, there is still a lot of cold weather yet to come.

Getting anxious to prune your shrubs? Unfortunately, so are a lot of other gardeners. It's too early for most shrub pruning and in some cases it isn't even necessary.

Prune your shrubs only if there is a need. Reasons for pruning are to remove dead or damaged parts, control plant size and form, train young plants, influence flower or fruit production, rejuvenate old plants and to remove hazardous branches.

Timing is everything when it comes to pruning. In order to properly prune your shrubs, divide them into three groups based upon the recommended time to prune. The three groups are winter and spring flowering shrubs, summer flowering shrubs and evergreens.

The winter and spring flowering shrubs include azaleas, camellias, spireas, Indian hawthorn, oriental magnolias and the banana shrub. This group forms flower buds during late summer and early fall, carrying them through the winter. Any major pruning should be done soon after they flower, allowing time for re-growth and bud set during the summer. Azalea pruning, for example, should be completed by early July.

The summer flowering shrubs, on the other hand, flower on current season's growth and should be pruned during the dormant season. These include crape myrtle, hibiscus, oleander, rose, vitex, althea and abelia. Due to our fluctuating winter temperatures it is often better to wait until February before doing major pruning. Fall or early winter pruning can stimulate growth too early, resulting in cold damage during some years.

With the recent freezes, signs of cold injury are evident on lantana, firespike, pentas and other tender perennials. Don't overreact and prune these plants too early. Wait until early spring before selectively removing dead and damaged branches. Right now, it would be impossible to determine the degree of dieback and the right places to make pruning cuts.

Some of the more tender landscape plants such as banana, cassia, gingers, some types of hibiscus and many of the tropical perennials may have been killed back to the ground. Avoid the urge to prune these down to the ground. Allowing the dead foliage to remain in place can actually insulate or protect the living portions of the plant and increase the chance of these returning next spring.

Evergreens such as holly, boxwood, ligustrum, juniper, podocarpus and waxmyrtle can be pruned any time. Even though they can be safely pruned during any season, fall is the least desirable time because of potential injury to new growth.

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Some pruning can be done now. Muscadine grapes, oaks, maples, hickory and other large shade trees can be pruned during the dormant season or just following a growth flush.

Almost all pruning of deciduous fruit trees should be done during the late winter or very early spring (before bloom). Since pruning may reduce cold hardiness, it is important to delay pruning until the likelihood of extreme cold passes.

Different training systems are used for different types of fruit trees. To learn more about how to properly prune your fruit trees, check out the UF/IFAS publication entitled “Deciduous Fruit for Northwest Florida”. It’s available online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG211> or by calling your local Extension Office.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.